

**"What About the Boys?"**  
**What the Current Debates Tell Us, and Don't**  
**Tell Us About Boys in School**

A keynote speech presented  
by Michael Kimmell  
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“What About the Boys”  
What the Current Debates Tell Us and Don’t Tell Us,  
About Boys in School

By Michael Kimmel

You'll notice that I've placed the question of my title - "what about the boys?" in quotation marks. That's because today I'd like to pose two questions to help frame our discussion. One, the question within the quotation marks, is empirical. What about the boys? What's going on with them? The second question, expressed by the question and the quotation marks, is cultural and political: Why is the question "what about the boys?" such a pressing question on the cultural agenda? Why is the question popping up increasingly in the cultural conversation about gender? Why has it become one of the litany of questions that compose the backlash against feminism? I believe that the answers to both questions are linked. But first let's look at each separately.

### **What About the Boys?**

Are boys in trouble in school? At first glance, the statistics would suggest that they are. First there are the numbers: Boys drop out of school, are diagnosed as emotionally disturbed and commit suicide four times more often as girls; they get into fights twice as often; they murder ten times more frequently and are 15 times more likely to be the victims of a violent crime. Boys are six times more likely to be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder.

If they can manage to sit still and not get themselves killed, boys get lower grades on standardized tests of reading and writing, and have lower class rank and fewer honors than girls, according to psychologist Judith Kleinfeld.

Finally, if they manage to dodge the Scylla of elementary and high school, they're likely to dash themselves against the Charybdis of collegiate male bashing. We read that women now constitute the majority of students on college campuses, passing men in 1982, so that in 8 years women will earn 58% of bachelor's degrees in U.S. colleges. One reporter, obviously a terrible statistics student, tells us that if present trends continue, "the graduation line in 2068 will be all females." (That's like saying that because the black enrollment at Ol' Miss was 1 in 1964, 24 in 1968 and 400 in 1988, that by 1994 there should have been no more white students there.) Doomsayers lament that women now outnumber men in the social and behavioral sciences by about 3 to 1, and how they've invaded such traditionally male bastions as engineering (where they now make up 20%) and biology and business (virtually par).

So the data seem to suggest that there are fewer and fewer boys, getting poorer grades, with increasing numbers of behavioral problems. Three phenomena - numbers, achievement and behavior - compose the current empirical discussion about where the boys are and what they are doing.

These three themes - numbers, grades, behavior - frame the political debate about boys as well. (Now I'm going to include the quotation marks.) Given these gender differences, it's not surprising that we're having a national debate. After all, boys seem to be doing both badly, and doing worse than girls. What may be surprising, though, is the way the debate is being framed. To hear some tell it, there's a virtual war against boys in America. Best-sellers' subtitles counsel us to "protect" boys, to "rescue" them. Inside, we hear how boys are failing at school, where their behavior is increasingly seen as a problem. We read that boys are depressed, suicidal, emotionally shut down. Therapists advise anguished parents about boys' fragility, their hidden despondence and depression, and issue stern warnings about the dire consequences if we don't watch our collective cultural step.

But if there is a "war against boys," who has declared it? What are the sides of the conflict? Who is to blame for boys' failures? What appears to be a concern about the plight of boys actually masks a deeper agenda—a critique of feminism. And I believe that in the current climate, boys need defending against precisely those who claim to defend them, they need rescuing from precisely those who would rescue them.

Their argument goes something like this: First, feminism has already succeeded in developing programs for girls, enabling and encouraging girls to go into the sciences, to continue education, to imagine careers outside the home. But, in so doing, feminists over-emphasized the problems of girls, and distorted the facts. Particularly objectionable are the findings of the AAUW reports on the "chilly classroom climate."

According to these critics, the salutary effects of paying attention to girls have been offset by the increasing problematization of boys. It was feminists, we hear, that pitted girls against boys, and in their efforts to help girls, they've pathologized boyhood.

Elementary schools, we hear, are "anti-boy" emphasizing reading and restricting the movements of young boys. They "feminize" boys, forcing active, healthy and naturally rambunctious boys to conform to a regime of obedience, "pathologizing what is simply normal for boys," as one psychologist put it. Michael Gurian argues in *The Wonder of Boys*, with testosterone surging through their little limbs, we demand that they sit still, raise their hands, and take naps. We're giving them the message, he says, that "boyhood is defective."

In many ways, these discussions rehearse debates we've had several times before in our history. At the turn of the century, for example, cultural critics were concerned that the rise of white collar businesses meant increasing indolence for men, and the separation of spheres. Then, as now, the solutions were to find arenas in which boys could simply be boys, and where men could be men as well. At the turn of the century, fraternal lodges offered men a homosocial sanctuary and dude ranches and sports provided a place where these sedentary men could experience what Theodore Roosevelt called the strenuous life.

Boys, in danger of feminization by female teachers, Sunday school teachers and mothers could troop off with the Boys Scouts, designed as a fin-de-siecle "boys' liberation movement." Modern society was turning hardy robust boyhood into, as the Boy Scouts' founder Ernest Thompson Seton put it, "a lot of flat chested cigarette smokers with shaky nerves and doubtful vitality."

Today, those same women teachers are to blame for boys' feminization. "It's the teacher's job to create a classroom environment that accomodates both male and female energy, not just mainly female energy," explains the energetic therapist Michael Gurian. Since women also may run those boy scout troops and may actually run circles around the boys on the soccer field, men can now retreat to the den to watch "The Man Show" and read Men's Health magazine.

In this way, the problem of boys is a problem caused entirely by women who both feminize the boys and pathologize them in their rush to help girls succeed. I'll return to these issues later, but for now, let me turn to what I see are the chief problems with the current what about the boys debate.

### **What's Wrong with the "What About the Boys" Debate**

First, it creates a false opposition between girls and boys, pretending that the educational reforms undertaken to enable girls to perform better actually hindered boys' educational development. But these reforms – new initiatives, classroom configurations, teacher training, increased attentiveness to students' processes and individual learning styles – actually enables larger numbers of boys to get a better education.

And since, as Susan McGee Bailey and Patricia Campbell point out in their comment on "the Gender Wars in Education" in the current issue of the WCW Research Report, "gender stereotypes, particularly those related to education, hurt both girls and boys." The challenging of those stereotypes, decreased tolerance for school violence and bullying, and increased attention to violence at home actually enables both girls and boys to feel safer at school.

Second, the critics all seem to be driven to distraction by numbers—the increasing percentages of women in high education and the growing gender gap in test scores. But here's a number they don't seem to factor in: zero, as in zero dollars of any new public funding for school programs for the past twenty years, the utter dearth of school bond issues that have passed, money from which might have developed remedial programs, intervention strategies, teacher training. Money which might have prevented cutting school sports programs, after-school extra-curricular activities. Money which might have enabled teachers and administrators do more than "store" problem students in separate classes.

Nor do they mention managed care health insurance, which virtually demands that school psychologists diagnose problem behavior as a treatable medical condition so that drugs may be substituted for costly, "unnecessary" therapy. These numbers of dollars don't seem to enter the discussion about boys, and yet the provide the foundation for everything else.

But even the numbers they do discuss—numbers and test scores— don't add up. For one thing, more people are going to college than ever before. In 1960, 54% of boys and 38% of girls went directly to college; today the numbers are 64% of boys and 70% of girls.

And while some college presidents fret to increase male enrollments they'll be forced to lower standards (which is, incidentally, exactly the opposite of what they worried about 25 years ago when they all went coeducational) no one seems to find gender disparities going the other way all that upsetting. Of the top colleges and universities in the nation, only Stanford sports a 50-50

gender balance. Harvard and Amherst enroll 56% men, Princeton and Chicago 54% men, Duke and Berkeley 52% and Yale 51%.

And that doesn't even begin to approach the gender disparities at Cal Tech (65% male, 25% female) or MIT (62% male, 38% female). Nor does anyone seem driven to distraction about the gender disparities in nursing, social work, or education. Did somebody say "what about the girls?" Should we lower standards to make sure they're gender balanced?

In fact, much of the great gender difference we hear touted is actually what sociologist Cynthia Fuchs Epstein calls a "deceptive distinction," a difference that appears to be about gender but is actually about something else—in this case, class or race. Girls' vocational opportunities are far more restricted than boys are. Their opportunities are from the service sector, with limited openings in manufacturing or construction. A college-educated woman earns about the same as a high-school educated man, \$35,000 to \$31,000.

The shortage of male college students is also actually a shortage of non-white males. Actually, the gender gap between college-age white males and white females is rather small, 51% women to 49% men. But only 37% of black college students are male, and 63% female, and 45% of Hispanic students are male, compared with 55% female. (If this is a problem largely of class and race, how come the books that warn of this growing crisis have cute little white boys on their covers?)

These differences among boys—by race, or class, for example—do not typically fall within the radar of the cultural critics who would rescue boys. These differences are incidental because, in their eyes, all boys are the same, and that "same" is aggressive, competitive, rambunctious little devils. And this is perhaps the most central problem and contradiction in the work of those who would save boys. They argue that it's testosterone that makes boys into boys, and a society that paid attention to boys would have to acknowledge testosterone. We're making it impossible for boys to be boys.

This facile biologism mars the apologists' often insightful observations about the sorry state of boyhood. "Testosterone equals vitality," writes Australian men's movement guru Steve Biddulph, "and it's our job to honor it and steer it into healthy directions" (p. 54). Feminists, Gurian argues, only make the problem worse, with an unyielding critique of the very masculinity that young boys are trying so desperately to prove.

This over-reliance on biology leads to a celebration of all things masculine as the simple product of that pubertal chemical elixir. Gurian, for example, celebrates all masculine rites of passage, "like military boot camp, fraternity hazings, graduation day, and bar mitzvah" as "essential parts of every boy's life" (p. 151). Excuse me? Hazing and bar mitzvahs in the same breath? I've read of no reports of boys dying at the hands of other boys on their bar mitzvah.

Feminist emphases on gender discrimination, sexual harassment or date rape only humiliate boys and distract us from intervening constructively. These misdiagnoses lead to some rather chilling remedies. Gurian suggests reviving corporal punishment, both at home and at school — but only when administered privately with cool indifference and never in the heat of adult anger. He calls it "spanking responsibly" (p. 175), though school boards and child welfare agencies might call it child abuse.

Permit me a brief digression about testosterone. On the surface, the experiments on testosterone and aggression appear convincing. Males have higher levels of testosterone and higher rates of aggressive behavior. What's more, if you increase the level of testosterone in a normal male, his level of aggression will increase. Castrate him – or at least a rodent proxy of him – and his aggressive behavior will cease. Though this might lead one to think that testosterone is the cause of the aggression, Stanford neurobiologist Robert Sapolsky warns against such leaps of logic. He explains that if you take a group of five male monkeys arranged in a dominance hierarchy from 1-5, then you can pretty much predict how everyone will behave toward everyone else. (The top monkey's testosterone level will be higher than the ones below him, and levels will decrease down the line.) Number 3, for example, will pick fights with numbers 4 and 5, but will avoid and run away from #1 and #2. If you give #3 a massive infusion of testosterone, he will likely become more aggressive – but only towards #4 and #5, with whom he has now become an absolute violent torment. He will still avoid #1 and #2, demonstrating that the “testosterone isn't causing aggression, it's exaggerating the aggression that's already there.”

It turns out that testosterone has what scientists call a “permissive effect” on aggression: It doesn't cause it, but it does facilitate and enable the aggression that is already there. What's more, testosterone is produced by aggression. In studies of tennis players, medical students, wrestlers, nautical competitors, parachutists, and officer candidates, winning and losing determined levels of testosterone, so that the levels of the winners rose dramatically, while those of the losers dropped or remained the same. (This was true of women's testosterone levels as well.) What these experiments tell us, I think, is that the presence or absence of testosterone is not the critical issue — but rather the presence or absence of social permission for aggression. Thus arguments to let boys be boys are likely to exacerbate precisely the problems they attempt to alleviate.

If it's not feminists' deliberately ignoring or raging against male hormones, the cause of boy's acting out must be that other current social calamity—fatherlessness. It must be we might hear, that boys today lack adequate role models because their fathers are either at work all the time or divorced with limited custody and visitation privileges. Discussions of boys' problems almost invariably circle back to fathers, or, rather the lack of them.

Contemporary jeremiads about fatherlessness remind us how central are fathers to family life, and how fatherlessness is the single cause of innumerable social problems, from crime, delinquency, to drug taking, sexual irresponsibility, poverty and the like. Fathers bring something irreplaceable to the family, something, “inherently masculine” notes Wade Horn, director of the National Fatherhood Initiative.

Unfortunately, we never hear exactly what the cause of all this fatherlessness is. To be sure, we hear about unwed mothers, single-parent families, babies having babies, and punitive and vindictive ex-wives (and their equally punitive and wealthy lawyers) who prevent men from being more present in their lives of their children. They would be there, if only women would let them.

“Fortunately,” writes Australian Steve Biddulph, “fathers are fighting their way back into family life” (p. 74). Fighting against whom exactly? Feminist women have been pleading with men to



come home and share housework and child care — let alone to help raise their sons — for what, 150 years!

As role models, fathers would provide a model of decisiveness, discipline, and ability to control one's emotions—which would be useful for their naturally aggressive, testosterone-juiced sons at school. But how do these same biologically driven, rambunctious, boys magically grow up to be strong, silent, decisive and controlled fathers? Easy— by women doing what they are biologically programmed to do: stay home and raise boys (but not too long) and constrain the natural predatory, aggressive and lustful impulses of their men. In leaving the home and going to work, women abandoned their naturally prescribed role of sexual constraint. Presto: a debate about fatherhood and boyhood, becomes a debate not about masculinity, but about feminism.

### **What's Missing from the Debate about Boys**

I believe, to the contrary, that it is masculinity that is missing in the discussions of both fathers and sons. Though we hear an awful lot about males we hear very little about masculinity, about the meanings of that biological fact. To raise the issue of masculinity, I believe, will enable us to resolve many of these debates.

When I say that masculinity is invisible in the discussion, what could I possibly mean? How is masculinity invisible? Well, let me ask you this: when I say the word “gender” what gender do you think of? In our courses and our discourses, we act as if women alone “had” gender. This is political; this is central.

Let me tell you a story about that invisibility, one that will also reveal the ways that invisibility is political. In the early 1980s, I participated in a small discussion group on feminism. In one meeting, in a discussion between two women, I first confronted this invisibility of gender to men. A white woman and a black woman were discussing whether all women were, by definition, “sisters,” because they all had essentially the same experiences and because all women faced a common oppression by men. The white woman asserted that the fact that they were both women bonded them, in spite of racial differences. The black woman disagreed.

“When you wake up in the morning and look in the mirror, what do you see?” she asked.

“I see a woman,” replied the white woman.

“That's precisely the problem,” responded the black woman. “I see a black woman. To me, race is visible every day, because race is how I am not privileged in our culture. Race is invisible to you, because it's how you are privileged. It's why there will always be differences in our experience.”

As I witnessed this exchange, I was startled, and groaned — more audibly, perhaps, than I had intended. Being the only man in the room, someone asked what my response had meant.

“Well,” I said, “when I look in the mirror, I see a human being. I'm universally generalizable. As a middle class white man, I have no class, no race no gender. I'm the generic person!”

Sometimes, I like to think that it was on that day that I became a middle class white man. Sure, I had been all those before, but they had not meant much to me. Since then, I've begun to understand that race, class, and gender didn't refer only to other people, who were marginalized

by race, class or gender privilege. Those terms also described me. I enjoyed the privilege of invisibility. The very processes that confer privilege to one group and not another group are often invisible to those upon whom that privilege is conferred. What makes us marginal or powerless are the processes we see, partly because others keep reminding us of them. Invisibility is a privilege in a double sense — describing both the power relations that are kept in place by the very dynamics of invisibility, and in the sense of privilege as luxury. It is a luxury that only white people have in our society not to think about race every minute of their lives. It is a luxury that only men have in our society to pretend that gender does not matter.

Let me give you another example of how power is so often invisible to those who have it. Many of you have email addresses, and you write email messages to people all over the world. You've probably noticed that there is one big difference between email addresses in the United States and email addresses of people in other countries: their addresses have "country codes" at the end of the address. So, for example, if you were writing to someone in South Africa, you'd put "za" at the end, or "jp" for Japan, or "uk" for England (United Kingdom) or "de" for Germany (Deutschland). But when you write to people in the United States, the email address ends with "edu" for an educational institution, "org" for an organization, "gov" for a federal government office, or "com" or "net" for commercial internet providers. Why is it that the United States doesn't have a country code?

It is because when you are the dominant power in the world, everyone else needs to be named. When you are "in power," you needn't draw attention to yourself as a specific entity, but, rather, you can pretend to be the generic, the universal, the generalizable. From the point of view of the United States, all other countries are "other" and thus need to be named, marked, noted. Once again, privilege is invisible. In the world of the Internet, as Michael Jackson sang, "we are the world."

There are consequences to this invisibility: privilege, as well as gender, remains invisible. And it is hard to generate a politics of inclusion from invisibility. The invisibility of privilege means that many men, like many white people, become defensive and angry when confronted with the statistical realities or the human consequences of racism or sexism. Since our privilege is invisible, we may become defensive. Hey, we may even feel like victims ourselves.

Let me give you two more illustrations of this that are quite a bit closer to our topic. In a recent article about the brutal homophobic murder of Mathew Shepard, the reporter for the New York Times writes that "[y]oung men account for 80 percent to 90 percent of people arrested for 'gay bashing' crimes," says Valerie Jenness, a sociology professor who teaches a course on hate crimes at U. C. Irvine. Then the reporter quotes professor Jenness directly: "This youth variable tells us they are working out identity issues, making the transition away from home into adulthood." Did you hear it disappear? The Times reporter says "young men," the sociologist, the expert, says "this youth variable." That is what invisibility looks like.

And finally, here's one more illustration of the invisibility of masculinity in the discussion of young boys, and how that invisibility almost always plays out as a critique of feminism. Asked to comment on the school shootings at Columbine and other high schools, Majority leader Tom DeLay said that guns "have little or nothing to do with juvenile violence" but rather, that the causes were daycare, the teaching of evolution, and "working mothers who take birth control pills."

Some of the recent boy books get it, get that masculinity - not feminism, not testosterone, not fatherlessness, and not the teaching of evolution - is the key to understanding boyhood and its current crisis. Michael Thompson and Dan Kindlon, for example, write that male peers present a young boy with a “culture of cruelty” (89) in which they force him to deny emotional neediness, routinely disguise his feelings and end up feeling emotionally isolated. Therapist William Pollack calls it the “boy code” and the “mask of masculinity”--a kind of swaggering posture that boys embrace to hide their fears, suppress dependency and vulnerability, and present a stoic, impervious front.

What is that “boy code?” Twenty-five years ago, psychologist Robert Brannon described the four basic rules of manhood.

No Sissy Stuff  
Be a big wheel  
Be a sturdy oak  
Give ‘em hell

Now, these four rules are elaborated by different groups of men and boys in different circumstances. There are as sizable differences among different groups of men as there are differences between women and men. Greater in fact. Just because we make masculinity visible doesn’t mean that we make other categories of experience - race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, age - invisible. What it means to be 71 year old black, gay man in Cleveland is probably radically different from what it means to a 19 year old white, heterosexual farm boy in Iowa.

Forget that biology and testosterone stuff: there’s plenty of evidence that boys are not just boys everywhere and in the same way. Few European nations would boast of such violent, homophobic and misogynist adolescent males. If it’s all so biological, why are Norwegian or French or Swiss boys so different? Are they not boys?

One cannot speak of masculinity in the singular, but of masculinities, in recognition of the different definitions of manhood that we construct. By pluralizing the term, we acknowledge that masculinity means different things to different groups of men at different times.

But, at the same time, we can’t forget that all masculinities are not created equal. All American men must also contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which we all measure ourselves. We thus come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of “others” -- racial minorities, sexual minorities, and, above all, women. As the sociologist Erving Goffman once wrote,

In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. . . Any male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself - during moments at least - as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.

I think it's crucial to listen to those last few words. When we don't feel we measure up - or, more accurately, when we feel that we do not measure up - we are likely to feel unworthy, incomplete and inferior. It is, I believe, from this place of unworthiness, incompleteness and inferiority that boys begin their efforts to prove themselves as men. And the ways they do it - based on misinformation and disinformation - is what is causing the problems for boy and girls and boys in school.

### **How Does the Perspective on Masculinity Transform the Debate**

Introducing masculinities into the discussion alleviates several of the problems with the "what about the boys" debate. It enables us to explore the ways in which class and race complicate the picture of boys' achievement and behaviors, for one thing. For another, it reveals that boys and girls are on the same side in this struggle, not pitted against each other.

For example, when Thompson and Kindlon describe the things that boys need, they are really describing what children need. Adolescent boys, Thompson and Kindlon inform us, want to be loved, get sex, and not be hurt (p. 195-6). And girls don't? Parents are counseled to: allow boys to have their emotions (241); accept of a high level of activity (245); speak their language and treat them with respect (247); teach that empathy is courage (249); use discipline to guide and build (253); model manhood as emotionally attached (255); and, teach the many ways a boy can be a man (256). Aside from the obvious tautologies, what they advocate is exactly what feminist women have been advocating for girls for some time.

Secondly, a focus on masculinity explains what is happening to those boys in school. Consider again the parallel for girls. Carol Gilligan's astonishing and often moving work on adolescent girls describes how these assertive, confident and proud young girls "lose their voices" when they hit adolescence. At the same moment, William Pollack notes, boys become more confident, even beyond their abilities. You might even say that boys find their voices, but it is the inauthentic voice of bravado, of constant posturing, of foolish risk-taking and gratuitous violence. The "boy code" teaches them that they are supposed to be in power, and thus begin to act like it. They "ruffle in a manly pose," as William Butler Yeats once put it, "for all their timid heart."

What's the cause of all this posturing and posing? It's not testosterone, but privilege. In adolescence both boys and girls get their first real dose of gender inequality: girls suppress ambition, boys inflate it.

Recent research on the gender gap in school achievement bears this out. Girls are more likely to undervalue their abilities, especially in the more traditionally "masculine" educational arenas such as math and science. Only the most able and most secure girls take such courses. Thus, their science are now, on average, approaching that of boys. Too many boys who over-value their abilities remain in difficult math and science courses longer than they should; they pull the boys' mean scores down. By contrast, few girls, whose abilities and self-esteem are sufficient to enable them to "trespass" into a male domain, skew female data upwards.

Numbers tend to be few, and their grades high. Boys, however, possessed of this false voice of bravado (and many facing strong family pressure) are likely to over-value their abilities, to remain in programs though they are less qualified and capable of succeeding. This difference,

and not some putative discrimination against boys, is the reason that girls' mean test scores in math and

A parallel process is at work in the humanities and social sciences. Girls mean test scores in English and foreign languages, for example, also outpace boys. But this not the result of "reverse discrimination," but because the boys bump up against the norms of masculinity. Boys regard English as a "feminine" subject. Pioneering research in Australia by Wayne Martino found that boys are uninterested in English because of what it might say about their (inauthentic) masculine pose. "Reading is lame, sitting down and looking at words is pathetic," commented one boy. "Most guys who like English are faggots." The traditional liberal arts curriculum is seen as feminizing; as Catharine Stimpson recently put it sarcastically, "real men don't speak French."

Boys tend to hate English and foreign languages for the same reasons that girls love it. In English, they observe, there are no hard and fast rules, but rather one expresses one's opinion about the topic and everyone's opinion is equally valued. "The answer can be a variety of things, you're never really wrong," observed one boy. "It's not like math and science where there is one set answer to everything." Another boy noted:

I find English hard. It's because there are no set rules for reading texts. . . English isn't like maths where you have rules on how to do things and where there are right and wrong answers. In English you have to write down how you feel and that's what I don't like. (Martino, 1997, p. 133)

Compare this to the comments of girls in the same study:

I feel motivated to study English because you have freedom in English - unlike subjects such as math and science - and your view isn't necessarily wrong. There is no definite right or wrong answer and you have the freedom to say what you feel is right without it being rejected as a wrong answer. (Martino, 1997, p. 134)

It is not the school experience that "feminizes" boys, but rather the ideology of traditional masculinity that keeps boys from wanting to succeed. "The work you do here is girls' work," one boy commented to a researcher (Mac an Ghaill, 1994, p. 59). "It's not real work."

### **Are Single Sex Schools the Answer?**

So, are single-sex schools the answer? There are many people who think so, and I'm afraid that my answer here is going to disappoint you. True there has been some evidence that single-sex schools are beneficial to women. There has even been some evidence that men's achievement was improved by attending a single-sex college. Empirically, these findings are not persuasive, since the effects typically vanish when social class and boys' secondary school experiences were added to the equation.

In their landmark book, The Academic Revolution, sociologists David Riesman and Christopher Jencks wrote that:

The all male-college would be relatively easy to defend if it emerged from a world in which women were established as fully equal to men. But it does not. It is therefore likely to be a witting or unwitting device for preserving tacit assumptions of male superiority. . . Thus while we are not against segregation of the sexes under all circumstances, we are against it when it helps preserve sexual arrogance.

In short, what women often learn at all-women's colleges is that they can do anything that men can do. By contrast, what men learn is that they (women) cannot do what they (the men) do. In this way, women's colleges may constitute a challenge to gender inequality, while men's colleges reproduce that inequality.

Consider an analogy with race here. One might justify the continued existence of historically all-black colleges on the grounds that such schools challenge racist ideas that black students could not achieve academically, and provide a place where black students were free of everyday racism and thus free to become serious students. But one would have a more difficult time justifying maintaining an all-white college, which would, by its existence, reproduce racist inequality. Such a place would be more like David Duke University than Duke University. Returning to gender, as psychologist Carol Tavris concludes, "there is a legitimate place for all-women's schools if they give young women a stronger shot at achieving self-confidence, intellectual security, and professional competence in the workplace." On the other hand, since coeducation is based "on the premise that there are few genuine differences between men and women, and that people should be educated as individuals, rather than as members of a gender," the question is "not whether to become coeducational, but rather when and how to undertake the process."

Single-sex education for women often perpetuates detrimental attitudes and stereotypes about women, that "by nature or situation girls and young women cannot become successful or learn well in coeducational institutions." Even when supported by feminist women, the idea that women cannot compete equally with men in the same arena, that they need "special" treatment, signals an abandonment of hope, the inability or unwillingness to make the creation of equal and safe schools a national priority. "Since we cannot do that," we seem to be telling girls, "we'll do the next best thing – separate you from those nasty boys who will only make your lives a living hell."

Such proposals also seem to be based on faulty understandings of the differences between women and men, the belief in an unbridgeable chasm between "them" and "us" based on different styles of learning, qualities of mind, structures of brains, and ways of knowing, talking or caring. John Dewey, perhaps America's greatest theorist of education, and a fierce supporter of women's equal rights, was infuriated at the contempt for women suggested by such programs. Dewey scoffed at "female botany," "female algebra," and for all I know a "female multiplication table," he wrote in 1911. "Upon no subject has there been so much dogmatic assertion based on so little scientific evidence, as upon male and female types of mind." Coeducation, Dewey argued, was beneficial to women, opening up opportunities previously unattainable. Girls, he suggested, became less manipulative, and acquired "greater self-reliance and a desire to win approval by deserving it instead of by 'working' others. Their narrowness of judgment, depending on the enforced narrowness of outlook, is overcome; their ultra-feminine weaknesses are toned up."

What's more, Dewey claimed, coeducation is beneficial to men. "Boys learn gentleness, unselfishness, courtesy; their natural vigor finds helpful channels of expression instead of wasting itself in lawless boisterousness," he wrote. Another educational reformer, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, also opposed single-sex schools. "Sooner or later, I am persuaded, the human race will look upon all these separate collegiate institutions as most American travelers now look at the vast monastic establishments of Southern Europe; with respect for the pious motives of their founders, but with wonder that such a mistake should ever have been made."

Ultimately, I believe that we're going to have to do this together. Single sex schools for women may challenge male domination, but single sex schools for men tend to perpetuate it. But single sex schools for women also perpetuate the idea that women can't do it by themselves and that masculinity is so impervious to change that it would be impossible to claim an education with men around. I believe this insults both women and men.

(I should say that one of the themes I will be raising in my workshop is the ways to make masculinity visible to young men.)

### **The Real Boy Crisis is a Crisis of Masculinity**

Making masculinity visible also enables us to understand what I regard as the real boy crisis in America. The real boy crisis usually goes by another name. We call it "teen violence," "youth violence," "gang violence," "suburban violence," "violence in the schools." Just who do we think is doing it -- girls?

Imagine if the killers in schools in Littleton, Pearl, Paducah, Springfield, and Jonesboro were all black girls from poor families who lived instead in New Haven, Newark, or Providence. We'd be having a national debate about inner-city poor black girls. The entire focus would be on race, class, and gender. The media would invent a new term for their behavior, as with "wilding" a decade ago. We'd hear about the culture of poverty; about how living in the city breeds crime and violence; about some putative natural tendency among blacks towards violence. Someone would even blame feminism for causing girls to become violent in vain imitation of boys. Yet the obvious fact that these school killers were all middle class white boys seems to have escaped everyone's notice.

Let's face facts: Men and boys are responsible for 95% of all violent crimes in this country. Every day twelve boys and young men commit suicide – seven times the number of girls. Every day eighteen boys and young men die from homicide – ten times the number of girls.

From an early age, boys learn that violence is not only an acceptable form of conflict resolution, but one that is admired. Four times more teenage boys than teenage girls think fighting is appropriate when someone cuts into the front of a line. Half of all teenage boys get into a physical fight each year.

And it's been that way for many years. No other culture developed such a violent "boy culture," as historian E. Anthony Rotundo calls it in his book, American Manhood. Where else did young boys, as late as the 1940s, actually carry little chips of wood on their shoulders daring others to knock it off so that they might have a fight? It may be astonishing to readers that "carrying a chip on your shoulder" is literally true -- a test of manhood for adolescent boys.

In what other culture did some of the reining experts of the day actually prescribe fighting for young boys' healthy masculine development? The celebrated psychologist, G. Stanley Hall, who invented the term "adolescence," believed that a non-fighting boy was a "nonentity," and that it was "better even an occasional nose dented by a fist...than stagnation, general cynicism and censoriousness, bodily and psychic cowardice."

And his disciples vigorously took up the cause. Here, for example is J. Adams Puffer, from his successful parental advice book The Boy and His Gang (1912):

There are times when every boy must defend his own rights if he is not to become a coward, and lose the road to independence and true manhood. . . The strong willed boy needs no inspiration to combat, but often a good deal of guidance and restraint. If he fights more than, let us say, a half-dozen times a week, -- except of course, during his first week at a new school -- he is probably over-quarrelsome and needs to curb.

Did you catch that? Boys are to fight an average of once a day, except during the first week at a new school, during which, presumably they would have to fight more often!

From the turn of the century to the present day, violence has been part of the meaning of manhood, part of the way men have traditionally tested, demonstrated and proved their manhood. Without another cultural mechanism by which young boys can come to think of themselves as men, they've eagerly embraced violence as a way to become men.

I remember one little childhood game called "Flinch" that we played in the schoolyard. One boy would come up to another and pretend to throw a punch at his face. If the second boy flinched - as any reasonable person would have done - the first boy shouted "you flinched!" and proceeded to punch him hard on the arm. It was his right; after all the other boy had failed the test of masculinity. Being a man meant never flinching.

In the recent study of youthful violent offenders, psychologist James Garbarino locates the origins of men's violence in the ways boys swallow anger and hurt. Among the youthful offenders he studied, "[d]eadly petulance usually hides some deep emotional wounds, a way of compensating through an exaggerated sense of grandeur for an inner sense of violation, victimization, and injustice" (p. 128). In other words, as that famous Reagan-era bumper-sticker put it, I don't just get mad, I get even. Or, as one prisoner said, "I'd rather be wanted for murder than not wanted at all" (on p. 132).

Gilligan is even more specific. In one of the most insightful studies of violence I've ever read, he argues that violence has its origins in "the fear of shame and ridicule, and the overbearing need to prevent others from laughing at oneself by making them weep instead" (p. 77).

Recall those words by Goffman again — "unworthy, incomplete, inferior." Now listen to these two voices: First, here is Evan Todd, a 255 pound defensive lineman on the Columbine football team, an exemplar of the jock culture that Klebold and Harris found to be such an interminable torment:



Columbine is a clean, good place, except for those rejects. Sure we teased them. But what do you expect with kids who come to school with weird hairdos and horns on their hats? It's not just jocks; the whole school's disgusted with them. They're a bunch of homos, grabbing each others' private parts. If you want to get rid of someone, usually you tease 'em. So the whole school would call them homos. (cited in Time, 20 December 1999, p. 50-51)

Harris says "People constantly make fun of my face, my hair, my shirts." Klebold adds "I'm going to kill you all. You've been giving us shit for years."

## **Our Challenge**

If we really want to rescue boys, protect boys, promote boyhood, then our task must be to find ways to reveal and challenge this ideology of masculinity, to disrupt the facile boys will be boys model, and to erode boys' sense of entitlement. Because the reality is that it is this ideology of masculinity that is the problem for both girls and boys. And seen this way, our strongest ally, it seems to me, is the women's movement.

To be sure, feminism opened the doors of opportunity to women and girls. And it's changed the rules of conduct — in the workplace, where sexual harassment is no longer business as usual, on dates, where attempted date rape is no longer "dating etiquette" and in schools, where both subtle and overt forms of discrimination against girls - from being shuffled off to Home Ec when they want to take physics, excluded from military schools and gym classes, to anatomy lectures using pornographic slides - have been successfully challenged. And let's not forget the legal cases that have confronted bullying and sexual harassment by teachers and peers.

More than that, feminism's offered a blueprint for a new boyhood and masculinity based on a passion for justice, a love of equality, and expression of a fuller emotional palette. So naturally, feminists will be blamed for male bashing — feminists imagine that men (and boys) can do better.

And to think feminists are accused of male bashing! Actually, I think the anti-feminist right wing are the real male bashers. Underneath the anti-feminism may be perhaps the most insulting image of masculinity around. Males, you see, are savage, predatory, sexually omnivorous violent creatures, who will rape, murder and pillage unless women perform their civilizing mission and act to constrain us. "Every society must be wary of the unattached male, for he is universally the cause of numerous social ills," writes David Popenoe. When they say that boys will be boys, they mean boys will be uncaged, uncivilized animals. Young males, conservative critic writes Charles Murray wrote recently, are "essentially barbarians for whom marriage is an indispensable civilizing force."

And here's that doyen of talk radio, Dr. Laura Schlesinger: "Men would not do half of what they do if women didn't let them," she told an interviewer for Modern Maturity magazine recently. "That a man is going to do bad things is a fact. That you keep a man who does bad things in your life is your fault."

Now the only rational response to these insulting images of an unchangeable hard-wired violent manhood is, of course, to assume they're true. Typically when we say that boys will be boys, we

assume that propensity for violence is innate, the inevitable fruition of that prenatal testosterone cocktail. So what? That only begs the question. We still must decide whether to organize society so as to maximize boy's "natural" predisposition toward violence, or to minimize it. Biology alone cannot answer that question, and claiming that boys will be boys, helplessly shrugging our national shoulders, abandons our political responsibility.

Besides, one wants to ask, which biology are we talking about? Therapist Michael Gurian demands that we accept boy's "hard wiring." This "hard wiring," he informs us, is competitive and aggressive. "Aggression and physical risk-taking are hard wired into a boy" he writes (p. 53). Gurian claims that he likes the kind of feminism that is, as he writes, "is not anti-male, accepts that boys are who they are, and chooses to love them rather than change their hard wiring" (p. 53-4).

That's too impoverished a view of feminism — and of boys — for my taste. I think it asks far too little of us, to simply accept boys and this highly selective definition of their hard wiring. Feminism asks more of us than that—that we not accept those behaviors that are hurtful to boys, girls, and their environment - because we can do better than what this part of our hard wiring might dictate. We are also, after all, hard-wired towards compassion, nurturing and love, aren't we?

Surely we wouldn't insult men the way the right-wing insults men, by arguing that only women are hard-wired for love, caregiving, nurturance, and love, would we? (I am sure that those legions of men's rights types, demanding custody wouldn't dare do so!) I'm reminded of a line from Kate Millett's pathbreaking book, Sexual Politics thirty years ago:

Perhaps nothing is so depressing an index of the inhumanity of the male supremacist mentality as the fact that the more genial human traits are assigned to the underclass: affection, response to sympathy, kindness, cheerfulness.

The question, to my mind, is not whether or not we're hard wired, but rather which hard wiring elements we choose to honor and which we choose to challenge.

I remember one pithy definition that feminism was the radical idea that women are people. Feminists also seem to believe the outrageous proposition that, if given enough love, compassion and support, boys - as well as men - can also be people. Now that's a vision of boyhood worth fighting for.